

TERROR AND AMAZEMENT

Mark 16: 1-8; April 4, 2021 EASTER Sunday; Union Cong UCC

Rev. Robin Raudabaugh

The summer I was nine, my brother Ed burned down our barn. He didn't mean to, but he was fascinated by fire and in his experimentation with matches, he created a tiny fire that quickly grew to a roaring blaze creating a life of its own. Ed tried to haul buckets of water from the cow tank to extinguish the blaze to no avail. The hungry blaze spread quickly to the stacked hay and then licked up the wooden barn walls and by that time there was nothing he could do to stop what he had started except save himself. After the fire trucks, firefighters and neighbors had all gone home late in the evening, all that remained of our barn was a smoldering heap of ashes, blackened and twisted sheets of steel roofing, and the skeletal hulks of the destroyed tractor and combine. My exhausted mother finally asked Ed why he hadn't told someone right away, so that at least something could have been saved. Still hiccupping from hours of crying, he said that he couldn't because he was too afraid.

Too afraid. Too afraid of punishment – too afraid of what he had done and too afraid of what he had not done – and too afraid to tell

The women who came to the tomb early in the morning on the Sabbath following the horrifying events of the week before, came to do the things women always do following a death – bringing spices and cloths to prepare a dead body for the journey to what lies beyond death. These women must have had all kinds of feelings as they hurried on that morning to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. They must have been numb with grief and loss, with disbelief and sadness, and yet even with all those feelings, still ready to do the right thing, the proper thing of anointing the body with spices and herbs. They must have wondered too, about how they might roll away the heavy stone that had been placed over the doorway of the tomb, so imagine their shock when they found the stone already rolled away. And when they looked in, the tomb was empty except for a young man all dressed in white. 'If you are looking for Jesus,' he told them, 'he is not here – he has gone ahead to Galilee. Go tell the other disciples that you should meet up with him there.'

Fear froze them for at least a moment – then they ran – caught between terror and amazement – they ran – unable to ask any more questions – most likely leaving their baskets of spices behind in their haste – they ran – and they told no one what they had seen and heard – because they were too afraid.

What haven't you done because you were too afraid? Resigned from a current job to take a leap of faith into whatever might be ahead? Packed up or got rid of all your stuff and moved halfway across the country or world? Sold everything and hit the road? Committed to radical life changes in your purchasing and eating habits, buying real food, buying local, sustainable, determining to live into a healthier world? Made time – gave up something else – to write that book, take that meditation retreat, visit that estranged relative, mailed that college application for a degree you've always been interested in? Told your family about the disease you've known you have for weeks, months but didn't share? Played with fire ...

You can write your own too afraid sentence. We all have them – some huge fears, some tiny. The women said nothing that morning because they were too afraid. And yet, we could imagine, as Marylyn Bowman suggested, that because they were three women, while they may not have told anyone else, this news was too amazing not to wonder and roll over and over in their minds and private whispered conversations. And someone, sometime overheard. Or someone told. Or someone else had a similar experience.

Because even though the gospel of Mark ends with the women telling no one because they were too afraid, we know that the story did not end there. We know that eventually the story got out. We don't know exactly how. We know that the other gospel writers – Matthew, Luke, and John have fuller, more elaborate stories of what happened next.

The writers of these later gospels each tell the story a bit differently. Matthew includes many embellishments – an earthquake, paralyzed guards, more women and disciples rushing to and from the tomb, shouting to one another. Luke's women are also terrified – but not so frightened that they didn't tell the other disciples and Peter who then ran to see for himself, and then tells everyone and anyone what he saw.

And John tells the most heart-wrenching, poignant story of all with Mary Magdalene going alone to the garden, sobbing with loss, when Jesus himself comes to her to reassure her – so that she is the one who gets to tell, “he is alive” first. When the other disciples hear the amazing news, they comically race one another to reach the tomb first.

But Mark is a journalist – just the facts – it happened like this – this is what you need to know – the rest, as they say – is history. Mark’s Easter gospel misses all the beauty and wonder, the poignancy, – and settles for fear – they told no one because they were too afraid.

Every single year, the gospel of John is included as the Easter lectionary gospel text. It is likely the Easter story you are most familiar with. I say the Easter story, because each of these gospel writers tells a different Easter story. They are not all the same. Why? Well, they were different writers, writing in different times for different audiences. They had different purposes, different agendas.

So where does that leave us? I know many love the beauty and wonder of the other gospels, but I like the gospel of Mark. I know it isn’t nearly as exciting as Matthew, or as beautiful as Luke or John, but I like the way Mark leaves the story unfinished – open-ended. I like that Mark doesn’t feel the need to neatly tie up all the ends – even though many who came later felt a need to help Mark out-creating two alternative endings for Mark’s gospel – one short and one longer – explaining what happened next. But Mark leaves us hanging. Mark leaves us right there with the women – teetering on the edge of fear and foreboding – having knowledge of something absolutely mind-boggling – and yet so filled with trepidation and disbelief and terror and amazement – and fear – that we too are immobilized – in that moment ...

But later – just like the women that morning - we find our words. We Christians find our words. Later – the fear of ridicule – the fear that no one could possibly believe what we have to say – the fear that someone might think we made the whole thing up – the fear of the unknown – the fear that we will be discounted because of who we are - all those fears lose to the need to tell.

Later – we cannot help but tell our story – what we saw – what we heard – how we felt - to everyone we meet – over and over and over – as our audience first listens with wide open eyes – with gasps of wow! – and sometimes roll their eyes when we begin once again. Later we tell not only other disciples – but our families – our neighbors – the woman down the street – the person next door – the gardener – the carpenter - the one who bakes and sells bread - the little children playing in the dirt. Later when the wonder of what happened blossoms and warms our hearts to burning – we tell – and tell – and retell ... because we can do nothing else....

Later we name it what it is – new life – not only for Jesus – but for us - our new life – your new life – new life for the whole world. Because the resurrection of Jesus happened – just like he promised it would happen. We don't know why or how or what really happened on that first Easter morning – we only know the tomb was empty – Jesus was gone - and right along with those women - we were filled with fear. Until later – much later – when - we weren't – and we told – and the ones we told, told someone else – and someone else – these words of new life and of God doing a new thing – spread like wildfire